The Minstrel

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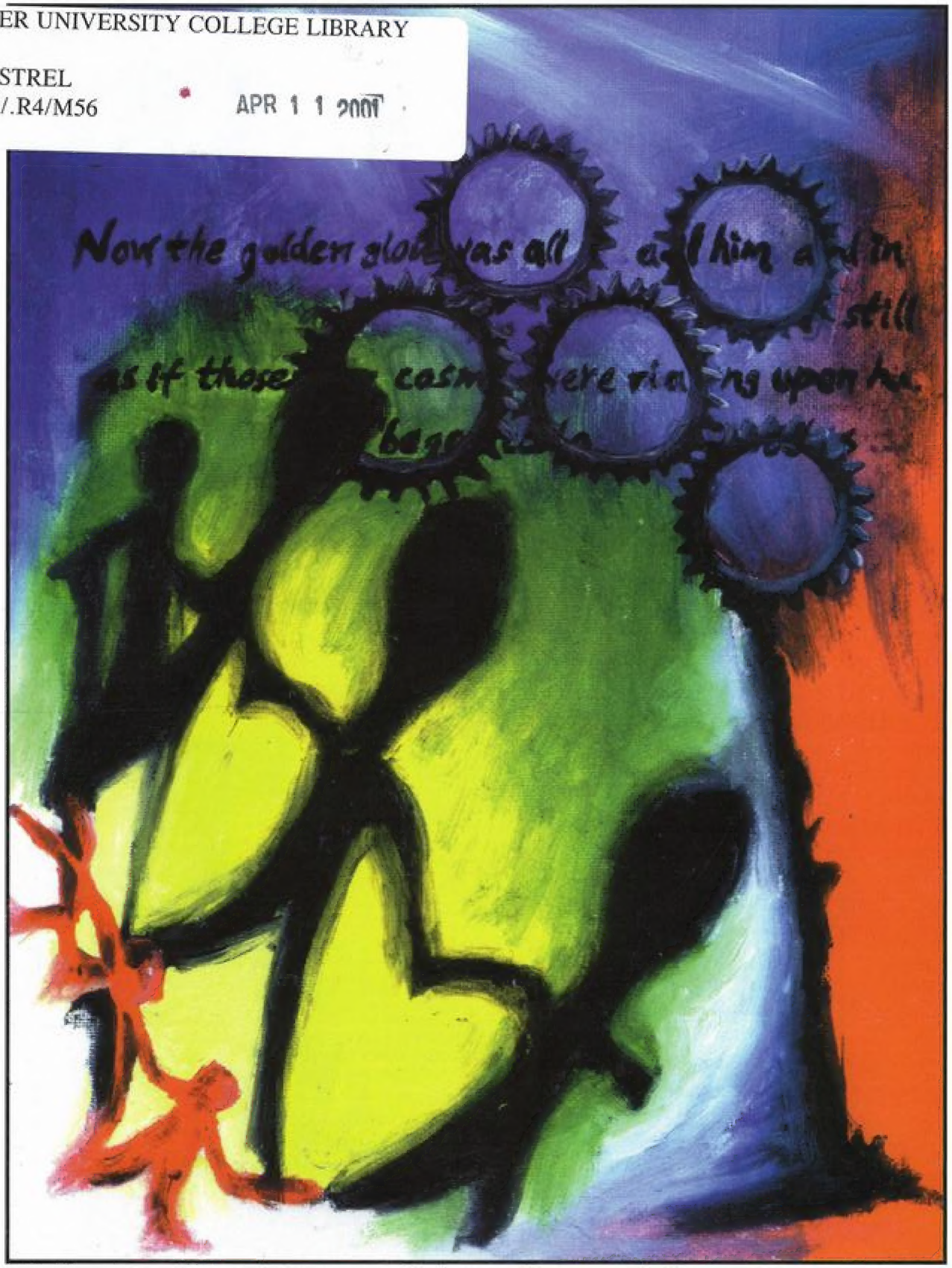

Redeemer University College's Poetry and Fiction Magazine
Volume 11, Spring 2001

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Ocsar Wilde

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impressions

a woman two tables away arches
an eyebrow to consider
another,
draped in silver
scraps of formalwear, shining
on the page, who turns to iridescent shadow
in my side-turned, staring gaze

across
the ocean, an infant
dies while another screams
and, in the middle, all this i consider
while i sip cran-
berry tea

Judith Byl

Vacancy

Motel
Full of ghosts
and doors marked "Do not disturb"
left ajar
A whimpering clerk
awaits no occupants
past tenants
skirt the property
the paper curls
the bed springs rust
and the sign blinks
Vacantly

Walter Miedema

Ants

Eleven thousand soldiers
Marching in a row
Feasting on the honey,
Dripping from my toe.

Stephen van Breda

Untitled

Star-lit loves embrace,
soft, sweet,
framed in the perfection of the full moon's kiss.

Words gently spoken a
bitter sweet farewell.
Walk away.

Tears slip into silence
mimicked by two single stars.
time is precious.

Tear marked moment.
selfish tears.
selfless tears.

Two single stars, tears
fall
streak an aching heart.

Rebecca Holst

The Music Box

At first she thought it was just the sound of the wind in the trees outside her window, for she was an imaginative little girl, and often liked to pretend that the wind was a pale smiling maiden, who sang songs to lull her to sleep. She closed her eyes and pulled the blanket up under her chin.

Then she heard it again. Four slow notes, soft but bright, rising and falling. Her eyes flew open.

Everything looked the same by the moonlight that slanted through the window; the pattern of the birch tree against the door, the row of blank-eyed dolls along the top shelf, the flowers on the wallpaper. Nothing looked different. She clutched the ear of her teddy bear and scanned the familiar shapes in her room once more. All was silent.

She held still for a while longer, controlling her breathing, then whispered to her teddy bear not to be frightened. It was just the music box on the dresser. Sometimes after she had wound it up during the day it would still have a few notes left in it. The ballerina dancer inside would go around once or twice more, then stop. She knew that, she had just forgotten; it had never happened before at night.

Again she closed her eyes, and snuggled down deeper into the blankets, relishing the warmth of the small tunnel she had created. Tomorrow mommy had promised to take her to the park and they would buy ice cream. . .the faster she slept the faster it would be tomorrow.

Three notes suddenly, faster and sharper, coming from the direction of her dresser. She made a small sound of surprise, and her heart beat faster in response. "Be quiet," she whispered, "stupid noisy. . . ."

But it wouldn't be quiet. Only for a few moments there was silence, then two slow notes that seemed to linger, to be drawn out, like the sound of playground taunts. *El-ly's a ba-by, El-ly's a chic-ken...*

"Stop!" she shrieked, sitting up in bed. Fury took hold of her small body and she threw back the covers, scrambled out and ran across the room. The music box stood unresponsive in the middle of the dresser, between the two china dolls. She grabbed it. The wood was cool and smooth in her hands. Without thinking about it, she carried it to the window, opened it and threw it out. The music box fell the twenty feet and landed in several pieces on the darkened grass. She looked at it for a while. It was just a broken music box. She closed the window, climbed back into bed, and pulled her teddy bear close to her again. "It's gone now," she said to him, and closed her eyes.

In the morning she told her mother that there had been a devil in her music box, and that when they went to the park she wanted the kind of ice cream bar that had all the little coloured sprinkles on it. She might even want two of them.

Reitje van Arragon

TO MY SONS
(The Rebuilding of Jericho)

And so I mourn for you, Abiram,
son of my youth,
firstborn of my womb,
child of my hope and expectations.
You were ever strong and virile.
Your strength and prowess as a hunter,
your gentleness and care as herdsman,
your joy and laughter in our rooms
warmed me and all our household.

We will build a city, Hiel boasted,
Hiel of Bethel,
Hiel my husband,
Hiel your father.
We will build a city in the valley,
a city by the river
to show the greatness and wealth
of Hiel and his son Abiram,
he boasted.

I shivered when I brushed against
the stones of ancient Jericho.

We will build a city, Hiel proclaimed,
over the grave of Abiram,
over the bones of Abiram,
over the memory of Abiram.
We will build a city, Hiel declared,
on the firm foundations we have set.

And now I mourn for you, Segub,
son of my age,
lastborn of my womb,
child of my comfort and consolation.
You were ever lithe and vigourous.

We will not leave this city, Hiel whispered.
not close the gates after Segub,
but stand in the gates for Segub.
We will not leave this city, Hiel murmured.

I now gather my daughters in my arms,
and watch my husband roam the streets,
unkempt for misery, haunted by despair.
And so we rock and wail with grief,
while waiting for mercy.

Hannah Helder

Untitled

My bedship goes upon the sea
a quarter past a half and three
salutes at the horn of Africky
and back to shore for cake and tea

Tiffany Heerema

Untitled

Catch a falling cloud,
Feel the gentle trees
    See what shapes
    The raindrops make
And touch the sighing breeze.

Stephen van Breda

be.

I closed my eyes once, and they opened on you

as you roused me from your couch
to send me home.
As you whispered my name
your breath gave it life,
and it lost the pejorative
it hangs with at home.
(But was the meaning it took
from execution or reception?)
And I awoke from a dream of

spooned beneath my arm, you grew

and sank with breath that still could dream
and I could wake you when it seemed

that small content had drawn its time
to press that lip and tongue with mine

and watch your eyes encompass me

a sainted kiss that can never be.

Brett Dewing

Escape

He takes a hurried step across the scuffed, worn cement of the underground floor, marking his destination without pause. She comes to him all in an instant, carried on a single sound he hadn't seen coming. Memory rushes over him like a strong wind; the metal is cool and unfeeling as it pushes ahead, and there is no escaping the weight of it. He was fourteen, newly hatched into a consciousness that made him look twice at the girl across the aisle. She wasn't easily ignored; she sat there carefully ignoring his gaze. He was embarrassed all of a sudden to be sitting next to his mother; her overflowing shopping bags, her untidy hair. He could not take his eyes from the girl across the aisle: the way the flickering lights reflected in her eyes, the way her form shifted from side to side with the rocking motion of the train. Her hands lay clenched slightly in her lap, her feet were tucked under the fading orange seat. "Do you know where to go?" a subway map above her head asked in neon letters.

The fourteen year old boy, sitting on the hard plastic seat of a hurtling underground snake, was filled with a certainty that consumed him. He had never felt this way about anything before. Usually things drifted in and out of his life–he altered little and nothing impressed itself on him. But never had he felt the absolute conviction he had at that moment that *he was meant to marry that girl.* It was fate, he decided, that they were together on that subway car at the same time. It was destiny, he was sure of it, which had drawn his eyes toward the girl and locked them there. There was no doubt in his mind. She picked up a crumpled newspaper that someone had discarded and twisted it impatiently; it became her curled bouquet. Dust was sucked up and flung about the car with the passing wind; it became her golden ring. The conductor announced the next stop on the loudspeaker. The subway doors whistled open and the train shivered to a halt, then his future stepped out the door followed only by threads of dust. He stared blankly at the sign "Do you know where to go?" and wasn't quite sure that he did. *The forty year old man takes another hurried step across the worn, scuffed cement and rushes on, pushing aside memory.*

Angela Reitsma

jigsawed

i
am searching
but Truth is evasive
when all i want
is meaning.
i try to touch
tangibility
but
my fingerprints smudge clarity and
the saran-wrap surface
of this shell i call myself
stretches
until it breaks
and smashes
on the yellowed linoleum of life
and when i try to put myself back
together
i end up with a million pieces
of reality
and a jagged scar on
my finger.

Beth Luchies

Buoy

If I could float you on my tears
Over the sharp rocks in the valley
My eyes would never be dry
But the pain is yours
And all the seas I could gush forth
Would never quench your grief
So while you tread to keep afloat
And swim towards a distant shore
Let me be a place to rest
For a while

Walter Miedema

winter

we went sledding
today, down killer hill, with the girls,
and planned to have hot chocolate
with marshmallows
afterwards

and we smile because we are typical
and we know it, making jokes
about the name

but someone's daughter died there,
and when we tumble, laughing,
we tumble on her
grave.

Judith Byl

What Child is this

born into bitterness
who comes so radiantly into
a world steeped in despair

what can you bring?
light,
shining

unto the ends of the endless universe
crossing the depths of our sin
to set us free from self

our piety reins over
the earth.
one.

who can save us from this carnage
we've caused.
but one.

an infant born into the
blackness of
an unfathomed fate.
what child is this.

Rebecca Holst

Untitled

The fiddler in the forest
played only for the trees
But if with upstretched arms I swayed
he also played for me

Tiffany Heerema

The Buzzword Statistic

Our professor matter-of-factly said
that Marie Antoinette
lost her neck
and for missing it wound up dead

but the details slipped between the pages of my text

A foul neglect failed to inform me
of the painted queen's final livery
Was a whalebone choker split that day
by Guillotine's merciful ware
Did the lady lie bereft of wig
and blush to find her crown so bare
Was it set down in view of her powdered head
before its politic succession

Did fair Marie lie eyes to heaven
for one final look at its clouding dome
fore-set with the glisten of sunhot steel
and that final mighty wedge in sight
Did she watch descent in her final eye
when her flash of life seemed hot and trite
Did her trachea's menstruation wet the blade
before her vertebrae parted ways

Or was her face toward the basket
set to catch it on its way
Did the wood annoy her neck
Was that her last concern that day
Could she hear the doppler hum
to warn her of her sharp surprise
Could she feel it keen but quick
and could she hear the needles click

Brett Dewing

Accident
August 25, 1977

Reliving it again
I am ten
With my brothers
Eating supper
Dad comes in
Face ashen
Tortured
Scared
Fearful

Have to call the ambulance
Why?
What's wrong?
"Mom's hurt"

Paging through the phone book
Frantically

Where's the number?
In the front cover

We are shielded
Not allowed out

Matthew.
He would be
Twenty three

Ian Van Leeuwen

To Know

I need to know if you were *real.*
I need to know it wasn't just a dream.
I need to know that fairytales can happen. . .can happen when you least expect it.
I need to know what we had.
I need *you* here with me.
I want to touch you again.

I don't want to let go of what we had.
I thought it would be okay. I thought I could handle you being *you* and me being me.

Apart.

I can't believe what I lost. I thought it would be better

without you.

I was wrong

I hate the feeling of loneliness. the desire to want you beside me.
The breath we once shared
together.
The moments. The times. The stillness.
The peace that held usclose.
You were my friend. You were my *love.*
You were the kiss that never ended.
Until now.
I had to let you go.

The *brokenness.*

I want you to put me to gether again.

I'm lost

Without you

Patricia Curry

Want You

I want you
but only for your
body
I want to
watch you
walk as
slowly as
you can
across the room
wearing nothing
but my coarse ghosts of
longing

I want your
lovely face
broken by
a quivering lip
and your
bearskin voice
on my thighs

I want you
but I cannot touch you
and our time is only air

between these fierce desires
my fear
obscures your name

Brett Dewing

A Letter for Walter

Walter D. Don was responsible for a thousand mailboxes. He'd been in charge of the mail room since it opened; back then the building only had two hundred boxes: one for every office labelled by name and one for him labelled only "Mail Room Spervisor." It had taken Walter two years to notice the spelling mistake; he'd meant to fix it then, but about the same time the building got sold to some upstart company that needed additional mailboxes and he never got around to changing his box-label. The local papers called the company a "jewel of investment potential" (Walter thought it strange that the building was never mentioned in the press releases). But eight-hundred mail boxes later the building and Walter's label hadn't changed; in fact, the typo had become a part of the building folklore: every memo and letter was addressed to "Walter D. Don, Mail Room Spervisor."

Walter's only fault – if it could be called a fault – was that he loved his work too much. He was as happy with his last pay cheque as he was with his first, and he never complained. Ever. His uniform was jeans and a blue shirt with "Don" embroidered above the pocket (the company had ordered them for him, and he took secret pleasure when people called him Don rather than Walter). His work week was forty hours, no more, no less. His wife had once tried to fool him into working on a Saturday; Walter just smiled and explained in his patient, fastidious voice that, "No, honey, we don't get mail on weekends," and went back to his newspaper. He had missed the joke; the serene look on his face had never wavered, as though he had attained nirvana by mastering the mail room.

In fact, he had mastered it, right down to every last name on every last mailbox. Everyone, even the new employees. Once a week, on Friday, he assigned each new person a mailbox and had the name memorized by the time he had finished the label. If a person was fired, Walter would stick the person's label in an envelope and send it to them with a note that said, "Best of luck! Sincerely, Walter." Retirees were extra-special: "Dear — : You've worked — years with the company, and now you're moving on. Congratulations on your retirement! From now on, mailbox number — is retired. All the best. Yours very sincerely, Walter D. Don, Mail Room Spervisor." Their mailboxes weren't retired, of course, but Walter did mount and laminate their label onto a chestnut-coloured index card. Maybe they hung them somewhere special, he told himself.

On Mondays, Walter arrived at eight-thirty. He parked his hatchback in his usual spot, entered the building through the loading dock, and walked down the hall to his mail room. He knew the memos pinned to the bulletin board by heart even though they weren't for him: my hall, my responsibility, he thought. Sometimes he wondered if every hall in the building was the same as his; he'd never seen any of the

others – even his boss came to his hall and his mail room to see him – and mild curiosity sometimes made his mind wander. But not today: he walked with his head down, wondering who would arrive and who would leave the building this week.

Only eight-hundred and nine mailboxes were currently occupied. Maybe they'll hire one-hundred-ninety-one people this week and bank out, he mused. But no, he knew, the building was full. As he hung his blue windbreaker on the lone hook beside the door, Walter noticed that box number six-six-five's label lay on the floor. While Walter fixed the weekend casualty, his sleeve caught box six-six-six's sealing tape and, for a brief moment, Walter panicked: the tape had never come off in his thirty-odd years, and instinctively he checked that seven-seven-seven was still sealed. Once, Brik Luther had asked for seven-seven-seven; Walter had said no (he hadn't felt like explaining mail-room superstition).

Walter looked around the office. His desk (he had never known such a fine desk) was a gift from his children; it sat in the corner, its cherry finish almost – but never completely, said Walter – perfect. He had a couch and a sorting table, and his filing cabinet was a slate grey. For decoration, he had a nice print of *The Scream* by Munsch that hung, slightly crooked, above his desk. Other people always saw darkness in the painting, but to Walter the figure in the print looked like he was trying to communicate through a mailbox. It seemed like instinct took over when people looked into mailboxes; without fail their hands would go up like they were looking through two-way glass, secretive, like the myriad faces and voices Walter knew every day. When he'd started working in the mail room, his wife hung a small crucifix beside the door. I don't care where you work, she'd said, Jesus helps pass the day. He smiled at the memory. Walter idly rubbed the charm that hung on his doorframe and remembered the awkward, elderly Jew who had dropped by on his retirement-day. Walter had been doubly surprised (and touched) when the old Jew suddenly embraced him, kissed him on both cheeks, pressed the small metal object into his hand, and thanked him for the nice note. Walter couldn't remember whether he was supposed to kiss the crucifix and touch the *mezuzah* or vice versa, so he did both every morning and evening.

The decorator who had chosen the taupe for the walls thought that Walter needed some warmth in the mail-room. "My *God*," she cried, "It's so *dim* in here! You must really miss *windows*." Walter just shrugged: windows in a mail room? The painter had kicked Walter out early on a Friday morning; it had taken Walter all the next week to sort out the new and departing employee boxes.

The rumbling of the loading-dock door signalled Walter that the mail was early, unusual for a Monday. Walter felt it a privilege to receive his mail in a big sack, rather than by hand; how many people are so important that the mail service drives a truck to their door? he often thought. Claude (who reminded Walter of one of his

granddaughter's crazy-haired trolls) always said little as he dumped Walter's two mail-sacks onto the loading dock. Walter smiled: there always was more mail on Mondays ("they don't deliver on weekends, honey") which thrilled him. He always looked forward to morning work (of course), but Mondays were special. He dumped the sacks on the table and separated the small packages from the letters.

Walter never grew tired of guessing what was in each package and envelope: office supplies here, meeting minutes there (he knew that he would never find out, of course, but it was *his* game, as though he were an old dog who still chased squirrels into trees). Mrs. Gurumby, box four-four-three, received magazines every month in plain brown wrapping. On Mondays she liked to meet at the mailboxes with Ms. Hartmold, box six-two-eight, and talk about Sunday's sermon. The rest of the week Mrs. Garumby went to the boxes alone: Mondays were safe, Walter decided (it would be tough to explain the brown wrapping to Hartmold). Gurumby once opened a "National Geographic" right in front of her box to reassure him, Walter was sure, that *every* brown paper wrapping contained the same sort of thing. Walter knew better: plain brown wrappings were like church confessionals – outwardly they looked fine, but *everyone* knew what they really were.

Most folks had no idea that they were watched by the man on the other side of their boxes, as though they were obstructed by some powerful mental-block. Walter could see them plain enough – what kept them from knowing he was there? But he had a strong ethic about those sorts of things, and knew that he could never take advantage of his position. It was all about trust, Walter told himself, a person's mail was a private affair, a responsibility he took very seriously. He even faced away from the cubbyholes when someone opened the mail just to respect their privacy.

But it would be impossible for Walter *not* to know a little about the mail that went out to the building. Mrs. Hartmold subscribed to a romance novel club, and proudly held the weekly selection while she gabbed. The brawny, muscular men holding the fragile, needy women on the covers of Hartmold's novels amused Walter as only such things could: "nonsense, honey, it's all just nonsense," he'd said to his wife about her own affection for romance. Walter Gereel Patel's *Hindu Connection* was a weekly addition to box one-six-two. Patel had acted like Gurumby on "package day" when he received a *Christianity Today*, checking both ways before scurrying off to his office on the fifth floor. In box one-one-three, Vice-President Matthew Huslip received a new box of ball-point pens every week because he never used the same pen two days in a row. His secretary was a chatty type who enjoyed the pen-box errand almost as much as Huslip enjoyed his new box of pens. Nancy Hurden had her three weekly credit-card bills, marked "Personal and Confidential," sent to her office address (Walter already knew that he had to close her box, number seven-three-one, by the end of the week).

Walter had just begun sorting the second mailbag when he saw it: beautifully heavy paper, finely printed crest, rich colours, addressed to box four-four-three. The envelope was a work of art – and Walter knew envelopes – that stood out from the pile like a diamond in a pile of granite. He picked it from the pile and studied it, first looking at the embossed pattern that ran along the edge of the back flap. Walter turned it over: the elegant navy blue script was the perfect compliment to the gold highlights and the subtle cream of the paper. A love letter? He wondered. No, it was too precise, too formal. A business contact perhaps, although it was thin enough to suggest rejection rather than high endeavour. If it was a business letter, it was certainly from a wealthy sender: no CopyCentre letterhead here, no sir, thought Walter. No, this was better. It positively screamed power.

Beatrice Helmsley
18 Fortune Road, Suite 612
Toronto, Ontario
Canada
K3F 5J8

"Well, you're a long way from home, aren't you?" Walter asked, startling himself as the small room echoed with his lonely voice. He didn't know Beatrice Helmsley or 18 Fortune Road, suite 612, or Toronto (he had never left Ottawa). Walter wondered whether Gurumby was expecting the letter. It was so out of character: Walter knew her mail, plain brown wrappings and nondescript letters, white with clear address windows and an occasional box. This letter was so, well, *interesting*. Uncountable letters and packages, thirty-odd years, a thousand mailboxes that changed as often as the weather – he had handled a mountain of information and thought he had it pretty well set. But despite his experiences, no one piece of mail had ever captivated him like the work of postal art that lay before him. Toronto. Images of high-powered law firms and advertising executives, rich sports franchise owners, and money flowed through Walter's mind like nighttime traffic on the Queensway.

But there was no mention of a company, so it must be personal, Walter reasoned as he ran a finger along the top edge of the envelope, hesitant. Personal. Gurumby. Walter bounced the two back and forth between his ears until he could almost hear it, manic thought-wrestling, attempting to make sense of the strange mail for box four-four-three. The letter in his hand was like a beacon, a bell-buoy guiding him to its creamy edges while mental warning shouts and inward threats battered him in a brutal quasi-legal cross-examination. He wanted intensely to see what was inside the remarkable specimen. *You can't do this!* his mind screamed. *It's illegal!* Throughout it all the letter remained in his hand, beckoning; Walter could not put it down, as though static electricity had bonded the envelope to his hand.

"I'd probably never get caught," he – or someone – said. "What's one letter?"

He couldn't believe that he was debating himself over opening a letter – he had never even briefly entertained the *idea* of breaking the law! Yet he argued with himself (which was worry enough) about something so simple, so black and white, so *right.* Ah, he thought, *right.* He knew at that moment that he had to put it away, lest it consume him whole. Walter stoically looked away from the letter and placed it in her box. He quickly grabbed some other letters and began putting them in their proper mailboxes. David Severent, box three-four-one. Bessy Nonimane, box zero-seven-three. Claire Fronting, six-seven-four. Walter stopped and looked at the next letter, a plain white business envelope addressed to "Mrs. R. Garumby, box four-four-three, personal and confidential." Bank statement, Walter distantly noted, she gets one every month. Against his will his eyes were drawn back to the elegant masterpiece that peeked slightly from her mail slot. Walter unconsciously placed the bank statement next to the letter, partially obscuring it from sight. Suddenly he envisioned Mrs. Gurumby on her monthly visit, taking the brown-wrapped magazine out of her mailbox, her eyes darting back and forth like a car-thief.

It would be so easy, Walter thought. And no one would ever know.

No! Walter's conscience told him as he found himself reaching again for the subtly embossed edge of the letter. *You've never done it before, Walter, you're an honest person. You won't do it either, you're not like them at all. It's her mail, not yours, no matter what the letter says.* He touched the letter gently, reverently, before taking it gently from the mailbox. He caressed the weighted texture of the stationery, his fingers dancing lightly around its edges. It was almost as if he was not holding it at all, as though it hovered over his fingers. It was like heaven, he thought, as though gravity was a minor inconvenience against his urgent need to read the letter.

For the first time in his thirty-odd years, Walter D. Don locked the mail room from the inside. He stole over to his desk, grabbed his letter-opener, and laid his letter on his desk. It lay bright as ivory against Walter's dun-coloured leather blotter. Last chance, he limply warned himself, then tore into the luxurious stationery. Walter gasped: the simple yet fantastic elegance of the letterhead was like royalty, the script was immaculate, the spacing perfect, and the texture of the paper was ecstasy.

My Dearest Rainey:

I've met someone else. I think it best if we do not correspond any longer – I am tired of loving someone I cannot touch, smell, or taste. I will miss your postage-stamp laughter.

Beatrice

Walter was unsure of what to feel. He felt somewhat embarrassed, as though he'd tripped while carrying the casket at a state funeral. But he also felt dirty; he looked

again at the script: the elegant loops of cursive mastery had somehow lumped into park bench jackknife etchings, rough and crude. Even the names now scratched at Walter with the fond reminiscence of schoolboy nails on chalkboards: *Beatrice Helmsley*, perfectly poetic, had been thrust against *Rainey Gurumby* like a groping teenager. It was a love letter of the worst sort, ending a twisted affair waged with stick pens, binder paper, and newspaper personal ads.

Deflated, Walter folded the letter, placed it into its envelope, and stuffed it into his pocket. It had been roughly torn open, its elegance snatched away in a flurry of ripped and wrinkled paper. He heard voices on the other side of the mailboxes, keys sliding into locks, letters whispering from their cubbyholes, and little doors clicking shut. Walter took a deep breath, looked at the unfinished pile of letters on his table, put on his coat, and left the mail room early for the first time in his thirty-odd years. When he brought Tuesday's sack of mail, Claude was surprised to hear Walter say "It's Walter, Claude. My last name's Don." And somehow, over the next few days, the name on his mailbox was changed to "Walter Don, Mail Room Supervisor."

Brent van Staalduinen

(untitled)

you turn away
in disgust
. . . or is it merely resignation?
and I gnaw
on the emaciated bones of our relationship
--because I have never learned
to lose gracefully--

Rietje van Arragon

Pause

Tall girl
with red hair
flowers
on her lap
sitting
on the hood
of her car
under the light
in an empty parking lot
at the end
of a tiresome day
for a moment
a pause
in the corner of sight
I saw her
as I drove away

Walter Miedema

This Cold

This cold seeps into this house
I have little chance to fight
Violently pushed past my walls
By dark and angry night

Though often shortly forgotten
By warmth of food and fun
It returns with intense vengeance
When storm clouds hide the sun

Entering my body with ease
It knows how to consume
Everything inside of me
Soon prepares it room

All joy now frozen solid
Cold is all I know
The harsh wind's hardened my heart
Which now pumps crimson snow

And now I do become it
Blows out my open mouth
In search of its next victim
To trap inside this house

Jeremy Swick
(Mark VanOord)

a prescription for knowledge

Climb pyramids in the Mexican jungle, and as
the ancient stone steps crumble beneath your feet,
ponder the mystery of Olmec statues
with their smooth broad lips and flat foreheads

Roam among the redwoods: Sherman and Grant,
while marvelling at the growth of countless years
and at the strength of what is, really, just a big tree
but somehow more majestic than anything built by man

Explore the catacombs of San Sebastiano,
which stretch out for miles far beneath the eternal city,
where no bones remain to frighten but only the memories
of a thousand devoted martyrs worshipping in silence

Perhaps, if you have the stomach, walk slowly up a firing lane
to a circle of execution, near a town called Vught,
and hear about prisoners who were gunned down in anonymity,
their blood pooling among the cobblestones

Wander down along the Appian Way,
with the rocks worn and rounded beneath your tourist feet
and know how many have walked there before you,
--including One in particular--

Do all these things and more
and only then--maybe then--
will I let you suggest to me
why *la gioconda* smiles

Rietje van Arragon